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ABOUT BASSES

By ORLANDO A. MANSFIELD

BY all earnest teachers and serious students of the theory or practice of music, it is now generally conceded that there is something more in a musical composition than a mere tune. At least one result of the deeper study of the problems of musical theory, and a closer concentration thereon, has been to show us that a work with an unsatisfactory bass is not altogether unlike a house founded upon the sand;—in this respect that neither can stand the stress of storm or the strain of time. Hence, the importance of an artistic bass being granted, it follows that any effort having for its object the diffusion of knowledge concerning this important factor in musical composition must possess more or less value and is entitled to receive some measure of appreciation. And this even if—as in the case of the present article—the matter as well as the space has to be limited, and the manner has to be analytical rather than synthetical,—in other words, dealing with the examination of a bass rather than with its construction.

Originally written as it should always be pronounced,—base,—the term bass possesses many meanings. Primarily and harmonically,—and in the sense in which it will be used throughout this article,—the word indicates the lowest tone in a chord, or the lowest part in a composition. This, of course, irrespective of pitch. Thus, in the following familiar phrase from Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata, Op. 53, in C, the tones C, G sharp, A, E, and F:



although of treble pitch and notation, would be regarded as the basses of their respective chords, and as forming the bass part of the entire musical phrase. In vocal music, as is well known, the term bass possesses a more definite meaning, being only applied to the lowest male voice. In orchestration it is employed—prefatorily—to denote the gravest instrument of a group, *e. g.*, the bass trombone, or the bass clarinet; and—substantively,—

Every technical expression relating to a melody or upper part may, with equal propriety, be applied to the bass. Thus a bass part may be, as regards progression, conjunct,—moving by small steps; disjunct,—moving by wide steps or by skips; or oblique,—remaining stationary while other parts progress. As regards tonality a bass may be diatonic or chromatic,—in accordance with, or contrary to the key signature. Then, as regards style or expression, a bass may be loud or soft, staccato or legato, and so on. Examples of all these will occur so readily to our readers that quotation will be unnecessary.

The bass founded upon arpeggio passages is, perhaps, not quite so popular as formerly. A very obvious example of such a bass, with the arpeggios in close position, is to be found in the development portion,—the portion following the first double bar,—of Beethoven's Pianoforte Sonata in E, Op. 14, No. 1. As an interesting example of arpeggio groups of wider compass we may quote Sir William Sterndale Bennett's Characteristic Study, "L'Appassionata," Op. 20, No. 2, *e. g.*:



Basses founded on broken chords,—the tones of a chord sounded in irregular order rather than in succession,—are very common. One of the first keyboard composers to use this contrivance systematically was Domenico Alberti, a Venetian musician born during the second decade of the 18th century. Alberti

worked the device to death, but it saved him from oblivion, the contrivance having ever since been known by his name, and termed the Alberti bass. Since his time it has become a veritable Godsend to writers of elementary pianoforte music, to the great masters in their weaker moments, and to smaller men when their inspiration or invention has failed them. It was frequently used by Haydn and Mozart, and is fairly common in Beethoven's earlier works, in which, if employed simply, it is always treated artistically, and never without good effect. As examples we may point to the episode (measures 9 to 25) of the Sonata in G, Op. 14, No. 2; and the bass of the second subject of the Sonata in C sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 2. A more legitimate example of a bass founded upon broken chords is to be found in the earlier portion of the episode (measures 14-22) of the Allegro con brio of the Waldstein Sonata, Op. 53.

From broken chords to broken intervals is a very easy and natural transition. Perhaps the best known example of this latter device occurs in the Allegro molto e con brio of Beethoven's Sonata Patetica, Op. 13. Here the whole of the first subject is founded upon a bass consisting for the most part of broken octaves. This feature was so prominent in the old harpsichord music of the later period,—towards the middle and end of the 18th century,—that a movement containing such a bass was called a Murkis or Murky, and the bass was known as a Murky Bass. When these broken octaves or other intervals were abbreviated, as above, they



were often known as the "spectacle bass," from their resemblance, when printed, to a pair of spectacles. The third figure shown in Ex. 3 is often used to represent a drum roll in pianoforte arrangements of orchestral music. Perhaps the most remarkable melody or bass founded upon broken intervals is the subject of Bach's great organ fugue in E minor, appropriately known as the "Wedge," from the curious way in which the subject, as it progresses, expands from a major 3rd to an augmented 4th, and thence from a minor to an augmented 6th, the whole concluding with an octave, *e. g.*:



Most frequently, however, scales and arpeggios, or broken chords and broken intervals, in whatever part occurring, are interspersed with passing or auxiliary tones, *i. e.*, tones foreign to the harmony, having a scale degree on either or both sides of them. A remarkable example of such a bass, and one which excited considerable adverse criticism at the time of its first appearance, is exhibited in Chopin's Impromptu in A flat, Op. 29:



Here the D natural in the bass is an auxiliary tone below E flat. Another beautiful instance is set forth in the bass of Bennett's pianoforte poem, "The Millstream," Op. 10, No. 2, *e. g.*:

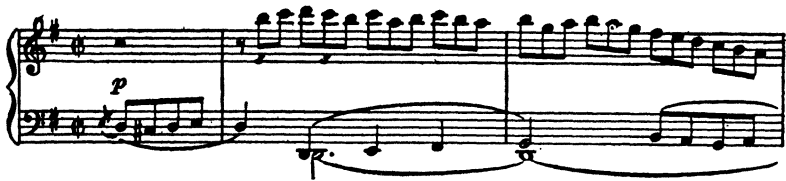


Many of the rolling contrapuntal basses to be found in the works of Bach, Handel, and other older masters, will be found, upon examination, to consist very largely of scale and arpeggio passages combined with passing and auxiliary tones, and the analysis of such passages will always be a profitable task for the tyro in musical composition.

In some cases composers have attached so much importance to the bass that it has become the principal melody of the work. This is very strikingly illustrated in Polypheme's song, "O ruddier than the Cherry," from Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, in which the vocal melody is assigned to a bass voice, supported by the orchestral basses in unison therewith, the upper parts—however important—being of secondary melodic significance, *e. g.*:



Melodic basses are very common in organ music, where they can be so effectively assigned to the pedals. Numerous instances occur in Bach's Choral Preludes, in Mendelssohn's 3rd and 6th Sonatas, and in Sir Hubert Parry's Choral Preludes on St. Mary and the Old 104th Psalm Tune. But it should be remembered that a melodic bass is a totally different thing from an unisonal bass, since in the latter all the parts sing one and the same melody in octaves or unison. A familiar instance of this treatment is shown in another Handelian bass song,—“The people that walked in darkness,” from *The Messiah*. This should be too well known to need quotation. Pianoforte students should possess sufficient knowledge of musical theory to prevent them from regarding as bass melodies those which should really be described as belonging to the tenor part, *e. g.*, the repetition of the subject of the Rondo from Beethoven's Sonata in G, Op. 31, No. 1:



Here the only real bass is the holding D, everything else in the lower staff belonging to, and being correctly described as, the tenor part. The error of calling this part the bass is probably due to that loose method adopted by theoretically uneducated pianists of referring to music assigned to the lower staff, or played by the left hand, as constituting the bass part. Which is at once inaccurate and absurd.

In the 17th century, and up to the end of the 18th, when musical engraving was as costly as it was crude, and the harmony was as obvious as it is now involved, accompaniments were played from a single bass part with superimposed figures denoting certain intervals, the disposition and doubling of these intervals being left to the discretion, or otherwise, of the performer. This bass was known as a figured bass; and, although now discarded except as a medium for the teaching of harmony, was the only system of keyboard accompaniment recognized in the days of the older masters. The figured bass was often called by the name of, or confused with, the *Basso Continuo*. But the latter was, really, a *continuous* bass, which continued throughout the entire composition, possessing no figures, and designed for the use of the cembalist or harpsichord accompanist. In playing from the Continuo

the cembalist used his left hand only, playing in unison with the orchestral basses, adding an upper part or parts with the right hand only in the symphonies or preludes to the vocal movements. The Basso Continuo was first systematically used by the Mantuan musician Viadana, about 1600. "Figured bass," says Mr. T. S. Wotton, "existed before the Basso Continuo was invented, and existed, especially in recitatives, long after the latter had died out." The old English name for figured bass was a Thorough or Through Bass. Dr. Maurice Greene (1695-1755), the friend of Handel, sometime organist of St. Paul's Cathedral, and the Chapel Royal, London, a Professor of Music at Cambridge, and a celebrated composer of old English anthems, has left an anthem in MS., entitled "Lord, let me know my end," which Greene has modestly described as "A Funeral Anthym for 4 Voices to a *Walking Thorough Base*, the *Finest Anthym Ever was Made*."

But whatever may be thought of Dr. Greene's "Walking Base," there could be no doubt as to the poverty of the basses of many of the compositions emanating from the period immediately succeeding Purcell and preceding Handel. As an instance we may recall the words of Henry Hall (1655-1707), sometime organist of Exeter and Hereford Cathedrals, who, in his lines prefixed to Dr. Blow's *Amphion Anglicus*, of 1700, thus deploras the poverty of the song-writing of his day:

Long have we been with Balladry oppress'd;
Good sense lampoon'd, and Harmony burlesq'd.
Musick of many Parts has now no Force:
Whole Reams of Single Songs become our Curse,
With Basses wondrous lewd, and Trebles worse!

While discussing the harmonic basses it may be well to mention that the expression "fundamental bass" is often used to denote the roots of a series of chords,—the tones upon which the chords are built. Thus, in the chord G, C, and E, C would be termed the fundamental bass, a point with which our theoretically instructed readers are already familiar. Then we must not forget that important variety of harmonic basses known as Grounds or Ground Basses. These are short musical phrases, generally of four or eight measures, one of which is placed in the bass and repeated several times, bearing at each presentation fresh harmonies and varied upper parts. Of this style of writing perhaps the earliest example was the old English part-song, "Sumer is icumen in," probably written by John of Fornsete, a monk of Reading, about 1226; while undoubtedly Henry Purcell (1658-95) was its next most

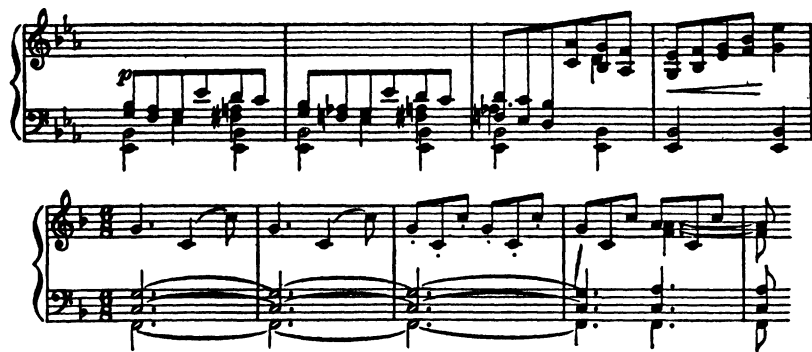
distinguished exponent. In his early opera, "Dido and Aeneas," composed about 1680, he has three songs on ground basses, one of which, "When I am laid in earth," exhibits an union of contrapuntal and harmonic skill with artistic effect which was unequalled before that time, and the same may be said concerning the songs and other movements on ground basses to be found in Purcell's Ode on St. Cecilia's Day and in many of his lesser known works. In Italian a Ground Bass is called Basso Ostinato, or obstinate bass. Thus Mendelssohn writes, under date January 8, 1838, "I shall seem to you like a Basso Ostinato, always grumbling over again, and at last becoming quite tiresome." Examples of Ground Basses, especially in the works of the older masters, are far too numerous to be mentioned in detail here. But we may allude to Bach's magnificent Passacaglia in C minor, for the organ,—the Passacaglia and Chaconne being old dances formed on ground basses,—and the chorus, "Crucifixus," from the Mass in B minor. Handel's affection for this bass is proved by a reference to his Passacaglia in G minor, and his choruses "Envy, eldest born of hell," from Saul; "The many rend the skies," from Alexander's Feast; and "Baal, monarch of the skies," from Deborah. Of these choruses the first is founded upon a descending major scale, the second on a short passage of repeated notes, and the third upon an arpeggio figure. Modern examples of ground basses are fairly numerous and may be found in Brahms' Orchestral Variations on a Theme of Haydn, also in the Finale of his Fourth Symphony in E minor. In modern pianoforte music there are at least two interesting movements in quintuple time, namely, Arensky's Basso Ostinato in D, in $\frac{5}{4}$ time, and John Ireland's Undertone, in $\frac{5}{8}$ time, the first of Four Preludes. Lastly, we may name Sir John Stainer's "On a Bass," an organ piece as charming as it is graceful and slender, and Sir Edward Elgar's "Carillon" which has been described as "one of the finest, if not the finest, examples of a ground bass in all music."

Students of eight-part counterpoint and similar musical intricacies will be familiar with what are known as Azzopardi Bases, so named from their reputed originator, Francesco Azzopardi, an Italian theorist, sometime Maestro di Cappella at Malta, who flourished during the latter part of the 18th century. In his "Il Musico Prattico," which was published in French, at Paris, in 1786, he gives several examples of these bases, which were designed for practice in working eight-part composition for two choirs. Some of them were quoted by Cherubini in his celebrated Treatise on Counterpoint and Fugue, and to that work

we must refer those of our readers who wish to pursue further this branch of our subject.

Another important variety of a bass is that known as a Pedal Bass, or Pedal Point. This may be defined as a holding, repeated, or ornamented tone, generally the tonic or dominant of the key, which appears in the bass and bears above it at least one chord of which the pedal tone forms no part whatever. Into the rules governing the construction of passages over a pedal bass we cannot enter here. But in fugal music the Dominant Pedal is generally regarded as a suitable place wherein to exhibit *stretti* and other contrapuntal devices. The dominant pedal usually precedes the tonic, the latter being generally reserved for the cadence. A double pedal consists of two sustained tones, the tonic and the dominant; while a triple pedal is formed of the foregoing with the addition of the supertonic. Ex. 9, from Mendelssohn's 1st Organ Sonata shows a sustained pedal; Ex. 10, from Bennett's delightful pianoforte piece, "Pas triste, pas gai," Op. 34, shows a repeated pedal; Ex. 11, from Moscheles' Study in D minor, Op. 70, No. 6, an ornamental pedal; Ex. 12, from Stephen Heller's *Dans les Bois*, Op. 128, a double pedal; and Ex. 13, from Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, a triple pedal. All organists are, or should be, familiar with the fine and interesting pedal point to be found in Guilman's March on a Theme from Handel, Op. 15, No. 2, which occurs prior to the reprise of the theme on the full organ. We regret that the passage is much too long for quotation.





As the ground bass became an essential feature of at least two of the old-world dances, so the pedal bass became "indissolubly joined" to the dance known as the Musette, a pastoral dance so named from a kind of French bagpipe popular at the courts of Louis XIV and XV. This dance was occasionally introduced into the operas of Dalayrac and other composers of the closing years of the 18th century; while classical examples are to be found in the 6th of Handel's Grand Concertos, and in the 3rd and 6th English Suites of Bach. The former, in G major, is, really, a second gavotte, alternating with the principal gavotte in G. Here the pedal, or drone bass, is represented by a holding note (Ex. 14).



But in the second gavotte, or Musette, from the 6th Suite, in D, alternating with the principal gavotte, in D minor, the pedal bass is formed of repeated tones, *e. g.*: (Ex. 15). The second gavotte



from Bach's Sonata for Violoncello, in D, is really a Musette in D, as so many of its phrases stand over a repeated bass, in this case D, and, as before, the tonic. And while the pedal bass is interesting from a purely theoretical standpoint, it is equally interesting artistically, and this whether illustrated in instrumental

or vocal music. Even the most fanatic and frenzied depreciators of Mendelssohn cannot but admit the charm of the *pianissimo* pedal point at the close of the "storm" chorus in his *Elijah*, *e. g.*: (Ex. 16).

And in that still
voice, on-ward came the Lord,

sempre pp

There now remains but one more variety of bass which we shall be able to discuss here, and that is one which appears in many forms, some decidedly artistic, others less so. We refer to what, in default of a better title, we will term a Descriptive or Storm Bass. This, which is to be found almost *ad nauseam* in passages denoting "dirty weather," is generally founded upon a legitimate combination of scales and arpeggios combined with passing and auxiliary tones. Thus we have Handel's fine chorus, "But the waters overwhelmed their enemies," from *Israel in Egypt*, *e. g.*: (Ex. 17) and

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Mendelssohn's "The waters gather, they rush along," from the chorus, "Thanks be to God," in his *Elijah*, *e. g.*: (Ex. 18). Beetho-

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ven has his own way of representing the storm in his Pastoral Symphony, and make his 'cellos and basses rumble and rattle thus: (Ex. 19).



On the organ, "thunder" pedals and basses have always been popular with partially educated audiences. Some writers, such as Lefébure Wély (1817-1869), have produced these effects more or less cheaply by putting down the lowest CC and CC sharp keys on the pedal clavier and causing these to speak simultaneously, some of the more powerful pedal stops being drawn. Other writers have contented themselves with the direction, "Pédale du Tonnerre,"—the latter a mechanical device to be found on some French organs, whereby several of the lowest keys on the pedal clavier are depressed simultaneously. On the other hand, Jacques Lemmens (1823-1881), the celebrated Belgian organ virtuoso, has represented the grumbings and rumblings of thunder in his popular "Storm" Fantasia in E minor, both as regards the commencement and subsidence of the "roll," by the successive employment and discontinuance of the three tones of the diminished triad on the pedals, accompanied on the manuals by sustained chords for the left hand and rapid chromatic scales for the right hand, *e. g.*: (Ex. 20).





From this hasty and compressed summary of the principal varieties of basses employed in, or introduced into, musical productions, our readers will already have formed some idea as to the importance of the bass in practical composition. This was a fact always emphasized by Bach, who considered that anyone who had mastered the *art* of writing and playing from a figured bass had “already grasped a great part of the whole art.” And although the basses of much modern music may differ in appearance and effect from those of the older masters, the general principles underlying their construction are identical, while their importance remains undiminished and bulks even more largely than ever as a factor in the general result. So indeed it is and will be with all music, present or future, material or mystical. For is it not Milton himself who declares that the music of the spheres cannot “make up full consort to the angelic symphony” unless “the base of Heaven’s deep organ blow?”